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ABSTRACT

The sex-fair characteristics which school librarians and media specialists should look for in the content, language, and illustrations when selecting instructional materials are described in this third learning module of an inservice continuing education program. Recommended criteria for selection include the portrayal of approximately equal numbers of males and females as competent participants in the working world and in the home, as people having a wide range of behavioral traits, and as people making significant contributions to civilization. Indications of sex-fair language in school materials are listed as follows: (1) the use of masculine pronouns only when males are referred to, (2) use of neuter generic terms in preference to masculine generic terms, (3) use of neuter occupational titles, and (4) the exclusion of preventable sexist stereotyping. Similarly, sex-fair illustrations are said to be those which depict realistic percentages of males and females, symbolization without stereotyping, awareness of body language, non-sexual grouping, non-sexist sizing and coloration, and clothing appropriate to the task in which people are engaged. Further criteria are presented for identifying material which will counterbalance sexist materials more strongly. Exercises for this module are included in the accompanying activity book. (FM)

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Promoting Educational Equity Through School Libraries

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MODULE 3:

SEX-FAIR INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS

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Introduction

Module 2 described why and how educational materials include sex-role stereotypes and reflected sexist beliefs. School librarians cannot really change the reasons that school materials have been unfair. It is also impossible to change all the existing materials or to prevent all new materials from being unfair. What we can do is to search out materials which are sex-fair or which have the potential for counterbalancing the unfair ideas communicated by many textbooks and library materials.

This module describes the positive characteristics which school librarians should look for in content, language, and illustrations of school materials. The following questions are answered:

(1) What characteristics of school materials communicate sex-fair ideas?

(2) When is the language of school materials sex-fair?

(3) When are the illustrations in school materials sex-fair?

Specific materials and sources of materials will be described in Modules 4 and 5.

Part One: What characteristics of school materials communicate sex-fair ideas?

Many organizations have attempted to list definitive criteria against which the adequacy of school materials is to be measured. Unfortunately, no single checklist of criteria is appropriate for all situations. Librarians consider: the purpose of each set of material in the classroom or media center; the audience for whom it is intended; and its relationship to existing materials in the collection. And, as budgets decrease and costs increase, we try to ensure that the materials we choose are the best of those available. To be best, however, materials must be sex-fair. In addition, they should, when possible, counterbalance some of the unfair or inaccurate ideas communicated by traditional materials. If we select the best materials, we take one step toward promoting educational equity.

In general, the best materials are those which communicate sex-fair ideas. These materials have the following characteristics:

(1) Males and females portrayed in approximately equal numbers. This means many more female adults, children, and minority group members than in most available materials. Children should have equal access to interesting characters with whom they can identify.

(2) Males and females portrayed as competent, successful participants in the world of work. This means more women portrayed in a greater variety of career roles, including management. Children should learn that males and females are equally capable of and suited for performing most jobs.

(3) Males and females portrayed as competent, successful participants in the work of the home. This means more males portrayed as caregivers and as capable of providing for their own survival in the home. Children should learn that the work of the home is important work in which both sexes should and do participate.

(4) Males and females portrayed as having a wide range of behavioral and emotional traits. This means females as well as males are sometimes portrayed as ambitious, decisive, aggressive, etc. Males as well as females are sometimes portrayed as gentle, timid, sensitive, etc. Children should learn that people exhibit a wide range of emotions and behaviors which are unrelated to their sex.

(5) Males and females portrayed as making significant contributions to civilization. This means the names and accomplishments of individual women are included and the contributions of women as a group are acknowledged. Children should learn that members of both sexes have made in the past--and will make in the future--important discoveries and contributions.

The best materials communicate these sex-fair ideas both through instructional content and through latent content. Thus, the best mathematics books include information about the contributions of women mathematicians (instructional content). The best math texts also include no problems which require classification on the basis of sex or which imply that females are less capable in mathematics than males (latent content). To choose the best from among several potential sources of information, librarians must look both at the obvious instructional content and at the subtle latent content. Each can communicate--or contradict--sex-fair ideas.

Part Two: When is the language of school materials sex-fair?

Language is one of the aspects of school materials which communicates sexism. Sexism, as described in Module 2, is integral to the English language. To rid the language of this sexism would require the addition of new words and pronouns and the elimination of many old words and usages. Since most people believe this is impossible, guidelines have been developed to help combat sexist language. Publishing companies and professional organizations encourage writers to use these guidelines and produce manuscripts which are bias-free. An example of the guidelines (those published by the National Council of Teachers of English) will be given to you.

The publication of guidelines does not mean the issue is closed. People have not agreed on the need for a change in language, the extent of change that is desirable and practical, nor the effect of change. Even when language is changed, neutral terminology may soon take on sexist overtones. For example, Ms. was introduced as a feminine equivalent to Mr., a title which excludes reference to marital status. Feminists hoped the new term would simplify matters and promote equity. But instead of reducing the number of possible titles for women, the introduction of Ms. enlarged them. The general public, supported by some newspaper stylesheets, seem to feel that Miss is appropriate for unmarried women; Mrs. for married women; and Ms. for divorcees or feminists! A sex-fair language can only be meaningful when the attitudes reflected or revealed by the old language are changed.

Nevertheless, certain language usages seem likely to promote--or permit--an accurate interpretation of an author's meaning and the development of bias-free attitudes. These characteristics should be preferred when librarians choose the best from among several competing materials.

(1) Masculine pronouns are used only when the author is referring to males. Females are not to be subsumed under male terminology. When an author or speaker is referring to either males or females, both males and females, or persons of indeterminate sex, a construction is chosen which avoids he, him, and his.

(2) Generic terms which sound neuter are used in preference to generic terms which sound masculine. For instance, people for mankind, community for brotherhood; hand-made for man-made.

(3) Occupational titles are neuter: flight attendant for stewardess; firefighter for fireman. Females are not given differential or diminutive titles (aviatrix or poetess). When careers are referred to in general terms, they are not sex-linked through use of masculine or feminine pronouns.

(4) Preventable sexist stereotyping in language is excluded. Descriptive terms which diminish, ridicule, or excessively glorify

one sex (little woman, old-wives' tales, man-sized job) are also excluded. In animal fantasies and other works of the imagination, names and feminine pronouns should indicate that female characters are included in roles other than the stereotyped ones.

The NCTE guidelines suggest many more criteria. It seems unlikely that many new educational materials or any older ones will meet all of these criteria. Reading and studying these criteria will, however, sensitize you to the problems of sexism in language. When language alone is considered, the best materials are those written in the least sexist language. Being familiar with sex-fair language also helps you to modify your own speaking and writing.

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READ NCTE GUIDELINES

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Part Three: When are the illustrations in school materials sex-fair?

Illustrations, like language, can communicate sexism even when the ideas in educational materials are sex-fair. Therefore, the best materials for schools communicate sex-fair ideas through content, language, and illustrations.

Sex-fair illustrations:

(1) Picture a percentage of males and females which is roughly equivalent to the real-life percentages in which males and females participate in the activity or role being shown. We would not expect the illustrations in a book about ice hockey to include as many women as men, but we would expect the illustrations in a book about tennis to show approximately as many females as males. The tendency for artists to omit females is greatest when prehistoric or other scenes which must be imagined are drawn.

(2) Use symbolization without stereotyping. Symbolization is a necessary part of communicating a story through pictures. To avoid stereotyping, people of different ages, sexes, body build, races, etc. should be shown in the standardized and symbolic roles of the smart one, the lazy one, the bossy one, the dummy, etc. A variety of people should be shown in roles which are positive and negative; central and supportive; active and passive. Although this may not be possible in a single, simplified book or story, illustrations should not resort to the by-now stereotyped symbolization of too many educational materials.

(3) Indicate that the artist or producer is aware of the subtle influences of body language on the interpretation of an illustration. Although evaluating body language in static pictures is easier than in real ever-changing life, the subtlety of the almost subliminal effects of body language makes the task difficult. The whole tone of a picture may be set by nothing more than a chin thrust up and out, the lowering of eyes, or the tilting of a head. Who stands boldly, and who sits quietly? Who is engrossed by work and who watches appreciatively? An artist's work may have the four characteristics listed above, but the subtleties of body language may prevent the work from being sex-fair.

(4) Group people according to criteria other than sex. Many artists have a tendency to group characters by sex. Mothers are shown with daughters or fathers with sons. Females are often grouped by appearance; males by activity.

(5) Picture girls as bigger than boys as often as boys are pictured as being bigger than girls. If adults are pictured, it is appropriate for the males to more often--but not always--be bigger than the females. With children, relative sizes must not be based on sex. Sizes and shapes should be varied.

(6) Use colors similarly when illustrating boys and girls, men and women. Pastels and pinks should not be sex-linked to girls nor blues and vibrant colors sex-linked to boys.

(7) Illustrate people in clothing appropriate to the task in which they are engaged: work clothes for work, playclothes for play for males and females.

That a book or set of materials be sex-fair seems to be a minimal standard when we consider how many textbooks and materials in existing collections are not sex-fair. Furthermore, males and females have been limited in career and personality options in both materials and real life. To provide a collection which is sex-fair, it may be necessary to search for materials which have these additional characteristics:

(1) Females are shown participating in some activities or careers in percentages greater than real life. For example, if children's materials reflected the real-life statistics that 7% of physicians are women, little would be done to inform young women that they deserve equal access to this profession and that it is equally appropriate for males and females.

(2) Females are shown in leadership roles, working toward career goals, and participating in outdoor, physical activities. They are shown misbehaving; helping each other and males to accomplish

tasks; producing things other than food; and solving problems. In other words, they are shown in a variety of roles which counterbalance the stereotypes.

(3) Males are shown as being passive, being helped by girls, and participating in quiet, indoor activities, particularly those related to self-sufficiency in the home. Boys are pictured as neat and clean; quiet; well-behaved. Men are shown in nurturing roles, performing household duties, and showing emotion. They too should be shown in roles which counterbalance the stereotypes.

These three points imply that materials which counterbalance traditional, unfair, or inaccurate materials must deliberately challenge the assumptions which underlie most stereotypes. As you should recall, these assumptions are demonstrably unfair and untrue. If so, the assumptions can---and should be--contradicted by the educational materials chosen by school librarians.

The real power to change collections from being unfair to being sex-fair lies in the hands of those who purchase school materials.

While guidelines such as those published by the NCTE were drawn up to assist authors and illustrators in producing sex-fair materials, they cannot be counted on to ensure fairness. Creative people can, if they want to, always find ways to circumvent the intent of even the best of guidelines. An example of this appeared recently in English Journal ("A Talk with Henry Maloney" by David Sohn, February 1976, p. 9). In the interview, the two men avoided any use of language which violated the NCTE guidelines. But, when referring to the stereotype of an English teacher who writes well but says little, Professor Maloney coined a new -- and subtly sexist -- phrase: "I think a lot of this notion was the result of a kind of elitist, 'Vassar-trained', carefully speaking person who could write with elegance. The substance of the message was lost in this scramble for great form." (Underlining added.) While the interviewee violated no guidelines, he managed to communicate the idea that the negative stereotype of English teachers was brought about by women.

To avoid this kind of occurrence it is important that people come to change through an understanding of the problem rather than through coercion. Once this understanding exists among people of good will (authors, artists, editors, publishers, reviewers, and purchasers and users of school materials), then the present unfairness will be corrected. Because the issue is complex and communication channels are indirect, change will take place more slowly than it would if a strict quota of half male and half female characters were imposed on every book. But, changes which come about through understanding and a sincere desire to be fair will be more genuine and will probably last longer than would changes forcibly imposed on artists and authors. Until change does take place, however, the responsibility to provide a balanced and fair collection will rest with school media specialists.